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# Ethnographical views on the *vaḷaikāppu*. A pregnancy rite in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

In Tamil Nadu, the end of the first pregnancy is marked by the celebration of the *vaḷaikāppu* rite. This article provides an ethnography of the rite as it is performed in rural areas by scheduled castes people. The first part will present the social context of reproduction as well as the ritual aspects of the ceremony. The second part will focus on the social interactions in which the performance takes place. The *vaḷaikāppu* ceremony will thus be seen as a prism to study various symbolic, medical, social and economical aspects of motherhood in contemporary Indian society.

Key words: Pregnancy; Ritual; Maternal Health; Reproduction; Tamil Nadu

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In India, apart from an often privileged, intellectual and activist minority, motherhood is expected of every woman. An occasion for family rejoicing, the first pregnancy is subject to rules, taboos and rites. The purpose of the latter is to protect the pregnant woman from numerous dangers connected with her state, which is deemed to be vulnerable, and to ensure the birth of a healthy child, preferably a boy. In Tamil Nadu, the end of the pregnancy is marked by the celebration of the *vaḷaikāppu* rite, of which this article provides an ethnographic description. We shall first recall a number of fundamental elements of the context of procreation in the Tamil milieu. Second, we will study the social and symbolic signification of this rite in contemporary Indian society. Then, we shall briefly consider the rules and precautions that are more or less observed

by women during gestation. We will thereby especially consider the contextualization of the *vaḷaikāppu* rite among all the prescriptions pertaining to women during this period. We shall describe the ritual procedures of the *vaḷaikāppu*, such as we have observed in a community of untouchables in a village of South India in the state of Tamil Nadu.1 This description will provide an opportunity to understand certain medical and social aspects of maternity in this community.2

## The imperative of procreation

Procreation, in India, takes place most often in the framework of marriage. The first purpose of the union of a man and a woman through this bond is the procreation of a child. The creation of a family enables of the materialization of the institution of marriage (Lowie 1961).3 It also implies the perpetuation of the family defined as the primary group of society (MacIver 1962: 238). Marriage is most often an alliance between two families asserted as a social fact of basic importance (Bhattacharya 2002, Das and Dey 1998). It is the outcome of a complex and judicious negotiation between near families, distant relatives and intermediaries. The former tendency that preferred marriages between near relatives (maternal uncle and uterine niece, first cross cousins) is making place for an alliance sought in the distant kinship. "(…) the arranged marriage is in fact perceived as a peaceful and reassuring route reducing unforeseen events of life outside the couple insofar as everything is anticipated in advance thanks to astrological forecasts and preliminary family inquiries" (Bourdier 2001: 158). Some practices of matrimonial alliances have today evolved toward forms of conjugal union that favour the mutual choice of the husband and wife and the absence of dowry. However, in the majority of contexts, all classes and religious affiliations considered, the arranged marriage is often preferred by families and is practised in most cases (Uberoi 1993). An ensuing evolution in the criteria of choice of the spouses is observed. Nevertheless, the option of the arranged marriage continues to serve the six functions described by Prakasa (1982) in Indian society: (1) it maintains an existing social system, (2) it makes the control of the parents over the spouses possible, (3) it increases the chances of preserving and continuing the ancestral lineage, (4) it reinforces kinship ties, (5) it ensures the consolidation and extension of familial property and (6) it preserves the principle of endogamy.

Thus, the celebration of the vaḷaikāppu ceremony announcing the future birth of the child is an opportunity to recall and reinforce the union of the families of the progenitors established by marriage ties. Moreover, the social framework of marriage requires the preferred procreation of a boy. In distinction to a girl, the boy will not leave the familial home. He will be responsible for providing for the needs of his parents when they are no longer of working age and for ensuring the performance of the funeral rites of the latter. The marriage of the girl imposes increased expenses. The parents must often become indebted in order to satisfy the dowry demands of the husband's family. On the other hand, the marriage of a boy guarantees his parents the acquisition of various consumer goods as well as a considerable broadening of the social network.

Puberty, engagement and marriage rites, as well as ceremonies involving the burying of the placenta have a single objective in South India: the future procreative power of the female body. The ascertainment of infertility is experienced as a failure of the couple and of the entire social group around the spouses because, in the Indian context, the birth of a child is accompanied by an

improvement of the social status, prosperity and power of the familial group. Consequently, procreation is an obligation that extends beyond that of the spouses (Patel 1994). The social consequences of infertility are dramatic for the woman – who is often alone called into question – and can lead in the worst case to rejection or suicide, at best to the arrival of a new wife in the household. An infertile woman is called malaṭi in Tamil and an infertile man malaṭan. The malaṭi is more often subject to criticism than the malaṭan. A childless person, especially a woman, is held in universal contempt and is disgraced. Kapadia (1995) mentions that male fertility is taken for granted in all castes. Should a couple have no children, it is universally assumed to be the "fault" of the woman. In Karik,4 the village under study, the forms of recourse for the treatment of infertility are most often a matter of popular treatment of the disorder, of remedies given by the traditional birth attendants or of ceremonies of a religious nature.5 Reproductive healthcare and medically assisted aid for procreation are too costly to be a conceivable solution in the treatment of infertility for poor families. Among Hindus, infertility would be interpreted in the framework of the law of karma6 as the result of transgressions committed in this life or in earlier lives, as a failure to perform rites or as mistakes committed during their observance (Stork 1992). We will not however attribute this causal representation to our interlocutors, who never mentioned it and evoked neither their beliefs in reincarnation nor in the deities of the orthodox Hindu pantheon.7

In the Tamil context, the only enviable status of women is that of kaṭṭukkalutti, the married woman. The attribution of responsibility for infertility to the woman can be read throughout the theoretical corpus on the female status in this region. In Tamil Nadu, the ancient text Nallatańkaḷ, the Good Young Sister,8 as well as relatively recent studies (Kapadia 1995, Leslie 1992, Wadley 1991), describe the typology of female statuses. Accordingly, the unmarried virgin, kanni, is characterized by a capricious but auspicious power that puberty rites undertake to canalize. The unmarried mother is seen as evil and inauspicious. She could become a ghost at her death and threaten the prosperity of the community. The married woman with children, kaṭṭukkalutti, is beneficent and auspicious. She would continue to ensure the prosperity of her family after her death. The sterile woman, malaṭi, is potentially evil and inauspicious. After her death, she could disturb the fertility of beings in the community. The widow, vitavai, is viewed as the worst type because she was not able to preserve the health and life of her husband. Finally, the woman who dies during pregnancy or childbirth, cumaitāńki, would be potentially evil and held responsible for a difficult pregnancy or childbirth.

## The contemporary manifestations of a tradition

The performance of the vaḷaikāppu rite is contingent upon numerous transactions between the members of the natal and conjugal families and is the occasion of inordinate expenses. According to contemporary social prescriptions, the vaḷaikāppu should be celebrated with magnificence and sumptuousness. Previously, according to the old women in Karik, the rite was less elaborate and the gifts limited to various essential products. Today, the gifts given to the young wife and her conjugal family by the natal family are very numerous: jewellery, saris, household appliances and mobile telephones are generally the items expected. The increase in these expenses in not specific to the celebration of the vaḷaikāppu. A similar phenomenon has been observed regarding the

amount of the dowry demanded at the time of marriage. This observation made by a number of authors (Gupte and Bandewar 1997, Paras 1990; Tambiah 1973) is clearly expressed in Karik by the women of an age to marry their daughters. One of them said to us on this subject:

> "Earlier, the marriage was quite simple. For the dowry, the families of the boys asked for pumpkins, bananas, small carpets and pillows. Now, one has to give gold, furniture and sometimes a motorbike!"

Jeffery (1989) in Uttar Pradesh and then van Hollen (2003) in Tamil Nadu have made similar observations. According to van Hollen, "marriage alliances involve not only the exchange of women in labour (in the sense of both production and reproduction), but also increasingly the exchange of women as commodities" (2003: 77). In Karik, the women testify to the harshness of the first months spent with their in-laws immediately after their marriage. They mention numerous domestic chores for which they are responsible, incessant questions regarding the discontinuance of menstrual bleeding, a sign of the appearance of the awaited pregnancy, and daily reprimands. Those women describe the damaging effects of a system in which a market value is ascribed to them and recount stories of crimes committed because of dowry.9 We also observed that the preparations for the vaḷaikāppu sometimes revive quarrels on this subject.10 For the parents of the mother-to-be, one of the objectives of the vaḷaikāppu is to satisfy the demands and requirements of the in-laws. This is the necessary condition to ensure their girl a tranquil end of pregnancy without conflicts. Moreover, the young woman appears as a negotiator in the transactions that take place between her natal and conjugal families in the period preceding the vaḷaikāppu. Generally admonished by her in-laws, she is obliged to obtain from her parents the amount necessary for the preparation of the rite in the best possible conditions. Should her request be rejected, or insufficiently fulfilled, she will be accused of having shown her preference for her natal family at the cost of her conjugal family. She must suffer the consequences that are sometimes expressed by acts of violence. In Karik, the costs connected with the celebration of the vaḷaikāppu often necessitate that the families ask for loans. The money is seldom borrowed from a bank and the families must resort to a pawnbroker, subjecting them to considerable indebtedness.

Changes in the observance of the vaḷaikāppu are not only connected with the relations men maintain with the women they bring to their family through marriage. These changes occur in a context in which the major issue in the celebration of events in life (birth, puberty, marriage, death) is the maintenance or improvement of the social status of the families. According to this logic, persons from poor classes have the tendency to conform to behaviours similar to those of the upper social classes. This conformity is included among the issues of the contemporary adaptation of the caste system, one of the major processes of which is the phenomenon of Sanskritization described by Srinivas (1996). This is a movement through which the lower castes, in their will for social mobility, attempt to adopt behaviours, status, symbols and practices of the upper castes (Deliège 2004b).11 This movement is not reduced to the acceptation of precepts defined in the Sanskrit literature it also participate on a wider process of modernization (ibid.: 225). It would be also at the source of the phenomenon of the increase in the amount of dowries (van Hollen 2003). One should recall that the vaḷaikāppu does have roots in brahmanical tradition. In the past this ceremony was only performed within Brahmin communities or among high-caste communities, before it has been generalized among other groups (ibid.: 79, 100). Moreover, the process of economical liberalism is one of the two historical processes evoked in

order to describe the rise of dowry practice and demands amongst communities (ibid.: 99).12 Change in the vaḷaikāppu ritual is linked to the history of dowry in India. This pregnancy rite thus followed a process of transformation and development. Those in the lower castes have in fact changed the ritual practices of the vaḷaikāppu, in particular by multiplying the expenses made on the occasion of this event.13 What is more, although the vaḷaikāppu is today celebrated in the majority of cultural, religious and social groups, this was not always the case. Some old women in Karik said that no rite was performed on the occasion of their first pregnancy. Deliège (1988) notes that this rite was not observed among the Paraiyars (paraiyar) in Tamil Nadu. In addition to the celebration of the vaḷaikāppu rite, the period of the first pregnancy is subject to specific rules and precautions. Far from being scrupulously and unilaterally followed, these prescriptions are personallyappropriatedbyallourinterlocutors

**A controlled pregnancy**

There is a widespread belief in the popular milieu in India that what is eaten or done by the pregnant woman affects the well-being of the foetus (Mira and Bajpal 1996). But this observation is not specific to India or to a particular time period. Every society at all times has worked out very precise rules regarding "the art of accommodating babies" (Delaisi and Lallemand 1980). In Karik, there are very many rules concerning the use of different kinds of food during pregnancy. One of the frequently mentioned rules is the following:

> "During macakkai14, we avoid rice, but will eat tapioca, koṇṭai kaṭalai [coconut powder] and aricipuṭṭu [boiled rice flour]. That is why we are in good health even after giving birth to several children" (Papathi).

Conformity to precise rules pertaining to food during pregnancy is, according to the women in Karik, a determining factor for maintaining the health of the mothers-to-be. These prescriptions are justified by the appearance of grave disorders of mother and child should their application be contravened. The failure to observe them can have dramatic consequences on the unborn child. As Nagavallie explains:

> "During pregnancy I didn't eat palāppalam [jack fruit] or bananas, mangoes or meat. Had I eaten those things I could have had a karuppakkuḷumai (uterine infection). If one has a karuppakkuḷumai, the baby [in utero] can have a caḷi [a type of cold]. There is no treatment to cure the caḷi of the baby. If it catches cold during pregnancy, the baby will have a cold from its birth to its death. That is why we are restricted in our food."

These women also say that eating food that does not conform to the diet would also cause the foetus to grow to too great a size and be responsible for certain complicated deliveries. The generalization of this conception in the rural area of India has catastrophic effects on the health of women and children. The diets imposed on pregnant women are found to be directly responsible for cases of anaemia during pregnancy observed in primary health centres and indirectly for the high rate of morbidity and maternal morality (Mira and Bajpai 1996, Nag 1994, Nichter and Nichter 1983). According to Mira and Bajpai (1996), food restrictions and precautions during pregnancy are closely linked to the women's social status. The purpose of dietary rules would be to maintain their submission to familial authority. It appears to us, on the contrary, that food restrictions are not so much imposed on the women as wanted by them. The dietary rules during

pregnancy represent for the women a preventive measure against a complicated childbirth. In some regions, death in childbirth is an event about which all women are well-informed, either because they have witnessed it themselves or by having heard about it. In these circumstances, the women implement the means of which they avail to best get over the ordeal of childbirth. The food restrictions observed by the women follow a logical system that differs from that formulated by the biomedical system. According to these women, the diet ensures the birth of a child whose weight is not great and provides an effective means of limiting the risk of a complicated childbirth.

Apart from the various food rules, the precautions to be observed and the restrictions made on women during pregnancy are very numerous. We shall not describe them here so a to not digress from our subject, but we note that the purpose of all these prescriptions is to ensure the favourable outcome of the delivery for both mother and child and the birth of a child without deformity. In the context of these rules, a woman giving birth will often be held responsible for the appearance of an unexpected event, such as a complicated delivery or an abnormality of the new-born child. Such occurrences are generally interpreted by the social group as resulting from a failure to follow the rules prescribed during pregnancy. The observance of the prescriptions during pregnancy is not as homogeneous as these preliminary conclusions would lead one to think. Far from being uniformly followed and applied, the rules of pregnancy are also subject to personal re-interpretations. For example, Palani, a woman from Karik, told us:

> "When I was pregnant, I did not follow the diet. One must follow the diet when one does not work enough, but I did all the housework myself and the diet was not necessary."

In Tamil Nadu, pregnancy is seen as the most vulnerable of all transitional stages. The state of the pregnant woman is ambiguous; she is passing through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past, i.e., womanhood, or of the future state, i.e., motherhood. The pregnant woman has a specific position in her family and in the society. This stage of pregnancy is existentially involved in the domain of life and death. At the same time, the woman and the baby in her womb are vulnerable and need protection from the evil eye, malign spirits and ghosts. There are dos and don'ts concerning appropriate food, activities and safe and unsafe places (Azis 1979, Laderman 1983, Aziz and Maloney 1985).

We shall now consider the different stages of the vaḷaikāppu ritual such as we were able to observe in the cēri15 at Karik. These stages were followed in the majority of cases. On the other hand, our observations of this rite conducted in town in the higher social classes and castes enabled us to note that in these contexts the rite was much less elaborate. It was mainly limited to what we have called the ceremony of bracelets.

### The vaḷaikāppu ritual, a chronological description

In Karik, from the first months following her marriage, the young wife will be impatient to discern the discontinuance of her menstrual bleeding. The young woman sometimes will share this news with a friend or a member of the family. Most often, she will not speak of the

occurrence until the pregnancy has been confirmed by the conspicuousness of a stomach that is becoming round or the repeated occurrence of nausea. In the middle or well-off classes, pregnant women are most often exempted from daily chores. In Karik, they continue doing domestic chores and agricultural work until delivery. The pursuit of these activities is necessary to maintain the meagre income of the familial group. The constant work during pregnancy also belongs to the numerous food and behavioural precautions that the pregnant woman must observe in order to ensure the favourable outcome of the childbirth. However, the women in Karik mention the time of their first pregnancy with nostalgia and speak of a precious time when everyone was more attentive toward them.

In Hindu, Muslim and Christian families throughout Tamil Nadu, special note is taken of a woman's first pregnancy: vaḷaikāppu or valayaṇivilā16 or cūl kāppu17 (talismanic bangle ceremony) or nīrmutuvu18 or mutukupāl19 (milk pouring). These are all Dravidian names of a ceremony known in Sanskrit as cīmantam20 (parting of the hair). The most common elements of this rite consist in satisfying the expectant mother and giving her choice foods and those she desires. Presents and blessings are also given to her. To ensure that the rite is performed before delivery, there is a preference to celebrate it during the seventh month of pregnancy. Sometimes, but seldom, it is celebrated in the ninth month, as nine is considered to be an auspicious number. It is felt in this case that the woman will give birth in the happy mood of the vaḷaikāppu celebration. The conjugal family of the pregnant woman conducts this special rite for the well-being of the expectant mother and unborn child. It also enhances the familial and social interaction between the pregnant woman's natal and conjugal families.

Thus, the vaḷaikāppu ceremony becomes a pretext for the pregnant woman to go to her natal home and spend a few restful weeks there before delivery. She not only gets physical rest, but also feels less tense and nervous than she would among her in-laws, whom she may not have known for more than a year. As the pregnant woman is more susceptible to evil spirits thirsting for the foetal blood, specific rites are performed to implicitly ward off evil forces that might destroy the foetus.21 Lastly, this ceremony is the public announcement and celebration of a woman's first conception, which is in a sense the biggest event in her life. The vaḷaikāppu is a rite de passage, classically divided in three phases of separation, transition and reintegration (van Gennep 1909 [1981]), in which womanhood is transformed to motherhood.

### The choice of an auspicious time

The vaḷaikāppu is an auspicious sacred ceremony and must be performed on an auspicious day. Therefore, the jōtiṭar (astrologer) fixes the auspicious day and time for this ceremony by referring to the Hindu calendar called pañcāṅkam (almanac). The in-laws of the pregnant woman consult their family astrologer to determine an auspicious day and the time for performing the vaḷaikāppu. The day and time fixed by the astrologer will be told to the natal family of the pregnant woman. The vaḷaikāppu is performed early in the morning before sunrise or in the evening after sunset; it is never performed during the daytime, for that is a period of rākuk kālam (inauspicious time). The nalla nēram (good time) for performing this ceremony is an auspicious night during the bright fortnight. Women in Karik said that this is because children and trees are never seen to grow except during the night. The moon-god is believed to distribute nectar through his rays, and this deity is therefore said to have the power of removing diseases and restoring

health. The most auspicious days for celebrating this ceremony are Monday, Wednesday, Thursday or Friday, since these days are under the rule of the Moon, Mercury, Jupiter and Venus. Sunday, Tuesday and Saturday are considered to be very inauspicious for the performance of this ceremony, as these days are under the rule of the Sun, Mars and Saturn (Underhill 1991: 25). Full-moon ceremonies are also especially connected with rebirth, a new life, while those of the new moon are associated with death and funeral aspects (Bhattacharyya 1977: 288). The popular belief that this ceremony is to be performed during a bright night is thus widespread among women in Tamil Nadu. The vaḷaikāppu signifies the intermediate stage between conception and deliveryandisperformedwithauspiciousarticles.

### A protective rite

There is a popular fear in South India that the mother may die at the time of delivery.22 The death of women in childbirth is in fact known and dreaded in every family. Tamil Nadu is one of the Indian states that shows a significant development of obstetric health institutions. Nevertheless, maternal and infant mortality rates remain high.23 Because of social or economic constraints, numerous women still have no access to biomedical obstetric services. These women give birth at home with the help of a traditional birth attendant and have a higher risk of mortality and morbidity than that observed in the hospital milieu in the case of complications. There is also a constant fear during pregnancy that the womb will be invaded by supernatural beings. This fear continuously haunts the minds of people, who view this period as a time of danger. On the other hand, if the woman survives delivery, people speak about marupiravi ("renewal"). There is a widespread saying in Tamil that the woman approaches death at the time of delivery and, after giving birth, she assumes a new life. Therefore, one attempts to satisfy the desires of the mother on behalf of the unborn child by the lavish cooking of five varieties of rice, as well as pickles, sweets and savouries, etc. If, in spite of performing the various rituals, the mother and child die at the time of birth, this is attributed to supernatural interference. Ipso facto, the rites performed correctly during the ceremony cause the woman's ātmā (soul) to rest in peace without wandering about as the malevolent spirit of the cumaitāṅki.24 Therefore, women attempt to fulfil the expectant mother's desires so that, in the case of death, she will not retaliate and harm the living. The continuation of life is the major and vital issue in every birth rite. Thus the vaḷaikāppu ceremony represents conceptualizations of man's desire to protect human existence from dreaded forces; the fear of death and malignant forces are ever haunting the psyches of individuals. The dichotomies of hope/fear and life/death are the basic cores around which these rites are conceptualized.

### The preparations

The expenditures for this ceremony are met by the natal family of the pregnant woman. The members of the natal family bring gifts and new clothes to their daughter and son-in-law. Since the pregnant woman resides in the conjugal household, her natal family members bring cīr25 or cīrvaricai (woman's wealth) and stay in the village temple, waiting for the husband's family to come and warmly and formally invite them to their house. The latter go the village temple with a

band and welcome the natal family. Accompanied by the musicians, they reach the conjugal home with the cīrvaricai for their daughter. The cīrvaricai consists of articles such as a new sari, a blouse, ribbons, dozens of bangles, five varieties of cooked rice, flowers, fruits and gold ornaments, which can amount to one or two grams or one or two sovereigns. The giving of gold to their daughter and son-in-law is not compulsory and depends upon their economic status. They also bring two garlands, one for their daughter and another for their son-in-law. Along with more valuable items, they also bring three pūcaipoṭṭa kuṭańkaḷ26 (new earthen pots with sacred marks), one from the natal family, another from the conjugal family and one from the pregnant woman's tāymāman27 or māman (maternal uncle or mother's brother). Other close relatives of the pregnant woman who want to wish her a safe delivery and the child's well-being also bring new earthen pots. In Karik, the vaḷaikāppu is performed by the vaṇṇātti (washer woman) of the village. This woman works as maruttuvacci (midwife/traditional birth attendant) to the village people.

The vaḷḷuvar (scheduled caste priest) can also perform the ceremony. The place for performing the ceremony is carefully prepared and the location itself varies considerably. It is sometimes in the house and is sometimes conducted outside the house in the courtyard. Once the space for the ceremony has been determined, a pantal (canopy) is raised. Adding a festive touch are the tōraṇańkaḷ28 (home decorations for ceremonial occasions), that is, the hanging of māyilaikaḷ (mango leaves) and vēppilaikaḷ (nīm/margosa leaves, Azadirachta indica) strings over the front door and on the pantal. The hanging of these leaves has a semantic value. The māyilaikaḷ have fertility significance, while vēppilaikaḷ are hung to protect the house from evil spirits, because the pregnant woman and her foetus are vulnerable to evil forces. The front portion of the house, where the ceremony is to take place, is purified with a light, adhesive coat of moist cow dung. The courtyard is then decorated with elaborate line drawings, kōlam (floor design). This is a necessary purification before any ritual on auspicious occasions and it also denotes that, in this particular house, an auspicious ceremony is going to be performed.

A maṇavarai29 (ritual platform) is placed on top of the kōlam. In front of the maṇavarai, Pullari30 (Ganesha) is represented by a cone made from fresh cāṇam31 (cow dung), into which a stem of grass called arukampul32 (Cynodon dactylon) is stuck and is decorated with flowers. Offerings such as arukampul, cantaṇam (sandalwood paste) aksatai (coloured rice), ūtuvatti (incense sticks) and lighted camphor are made to him. On either side of the maṇavarai are two large kuttuviḷakkukaḷ (standing brass oil lamps), with a kāmāṭci viḷakku (ceremonial lamp) between them. Two nīrkuṭańkaḷ (new earthen pots filled with water) are kept between Pullari and the maṇavarai. In the middle of the pots is placed a kalacam.33 A plantain leaf is placed directly over the kōlam. Raw rice is poured on this leaf and on top of it the kalacam is placed. The kalacam is filled with water. Usually mango or betel leaves are used to seal the mouth of the vessel. Such pots are used in Hindu temples to prepare water for the ritual of divine unction (Good 1987: 17). Along with these things, kuńkumam (vermilion), mañcal (tumeric powder) and cantaṇam are also kept on a brass plate or tray. Raw rice coloured with tumeric powder and a few mallikai pūkkaḷ (jasmine flowers) are placed in a small bowl. This is known as akṭatai arici34 in Tamil. The two nīrkuṭańkaḷ (new earthen water pots) and kalacam should be positioned in the form of a triangle. The two nīrkuṭańkaḷ and an unbroken tufted coconut in the kalacam are tied with twisted cotton yarn, murunūl. Three mallikai pūkkaḷ are put in three different nīrkuṭańkaḷ. The mouth of the nīrkuṭańkaḷ is closed with a vālaiyilai35 (plantain leaf).

Another stage of preparation of the vaḷaikāppu is dedicated to the pestle, a domestic object that represents during this rite the unborn child. Another long vālaiyilai is put on the left side of the maṇavarai. The ammi-kulavi (pestle) is kept on that leaf. The ammi-kulavi is washed and smeared with tumeric powder and is marked with dots of vermillion. The ammi-kulavi36 symbolizes the yet unborn child. The introduction of an ammi-kulavi in the vaḷaikāppu ceremony signifies the perpetuation of the wish of the pregnant woman that her child will be strong and have a long life. This imitative object is honoured during the ritual by keeping a pālaṭai (a shell used as a milk ladle), a kottu vēppilaikaḷ (a bunch of nīm/margosa leaves) and an arivāḷ37 (an iron sickle) together with it. These objects are kept together in order to protect the child from evil forces.

**Prevention against malevolent spirits**

The ālam38 is a red liquid mixture of tumeric powder and cuṇṇāmbu (slaked lime) added to karittuṇṭu39 (a piece of charcoal), one mallikai pū (jasmine flower) and one civappu miḷakāy (dry red chilly). It is prepared in a brass plate and is kept aside during this ceremony. The ālam has the virtue of preventing the pernicious effects of malevolent or jealous looks. It is universal among Hindus and particularly among persons who are in transitional stages such as puberty, marriage, pregnancy, as well as at birth rites. According to Dubois, Hindus call this evil glance tirusṭi-tōṣam (evil danger) (1989: 66). The hōma caṭṭi (earthen vessel for the sacrificial fire) is also kept in front of the pregnant woman. The elaborate preparations for the supakkāryam (auspicious ceremony) and the selection of an auspicious day for its performance underscore the social importance of the occasion. The supakkāryam indicates the movement of the subject from one position in the social structure to another; it marks a change in her social personality. The mukūrttam40 rite is the most important part of the supakkāryam and is consequently performed during the most auspicious part of the auspicious day. The subject undergoes a series of preparatory and purificatory rites before sitting down for the mukūrttam. During this mukūrttam period, the pregnant woman, after having been bathed and properly attired, is seated on the maṇavarai facing eastwards.

**The prayer to Pullari (Lord Ganesha)**

The pregnant woman and her husband are first summoned at the end of the rākuk kālam. They are asked to offer worship. They begin the ritual by offering prayers to Pullari. They light incense and camphor and then break open a coconut. Prayer is offered to Pullari (in the form of a cone of cow dung with arukampu on its top) before the actual ceremony commences. In pleasing the god, the couple wish to perform the ritual without obstructions. Generally, whether in the performance of religious acts or life-cycle ceremonies or the building of houses and the like, initial prayers are offered to Pullari in order to overcome obstacles and remove difficulties. The representation of Pullari should be the first object of worship whenever a rite is performed, as Lord Ganesha is thought to remove obstacles and ward off evil spirits. The hōmam (sacrificial fire) is lit in front of the pregnant woman. Nine auspicious seeds and grains (navatāṇiyam 41) are put in the sacrificial fire.

**Prognosis of the delivery**

After worshipping the main gods Pullari and Agni42 (fire), the iḷanīr kaṇṭirakkiratu (opening of the eyes of a tender coconut) rite is performed. The tuft of the tender coconut is not fully removed, but only cut slightly off to reveal the eyes of the coconut. This rite has symbolic value. The pregnant woman opens the eyes of the iḷanīr43, perforating them with her index finger (ālkāṭṭi viral). If the eyes are opened and the nīr (water) oozes out, splashing on her face, people will view this as a sign of a normal delivery. If the pregnant woman is not successful in the first attempt to open the eyes, she will have to try again with an arivāl (sickle). She will then penetrate the eye of the coconut with her index finger. In this case, it will be perceived as a sign of a future obstructed labour. Moreover, if the pregnant woman opens the eyes of the tender coconut without difficulty, it is thought that the child will not have any problem in opening its eyes at the time of delivery. If there should be any complication, then the child may have difficulty in doing so.

**A "traditional scanning method" for foetal sex determination**

A kaṭṭukkalutti 44 (auspicious married woman) holds a ammi-kulavi (pestle), standing on the left side of the pregnant woman. Theoretically, the pregnant woman is supposed to hold the pestle. However, because it is recognized by all that the effort of carrying a heavy weight is to be avoided at the end of the pregnancy, this function is carried out by a kaṭṭukkalutti. The pregnant woman, attired in her wedding garments, stands in the middle of the pantal. Three auspicious married woman hold a plantain leaf on the right, on the left and on the back side of the pregnant woman's body. The pregnant woman bends forward and rests her hands crosswise on two nīrkuṭaṅkaḷ (new earthen pots filled with water). She makes a hole in the nīrkuṭam, which are placed directly in front of her, with the tip of her index finger Then the pregnant women stay bended forward. A banana leaf is placed on the back, from her lower back to her head. Each kattukkalutti pours coconut milk with a pālatai (a milk ladle) over the central groove of a banana leaf using the right hand. This rite is performed to divine the sex of an unborn child and is said to be the traditional scanning method in Tamil society. If the coconut milk flows straight down into the water pots through the index finger of the pregnant woman, the birth of a male child is foretold. In this case, the maruttuvacci (midwife) who is performing the ceremony will shout loudly āṇpiḷḷai (male child) three times. Should, however, the coconut milk not flow straight down but crookedly, the maruttuvacci shouts peṇpiḷḷai (female child) three times. This part of the ceremony ends with the cutting of the murunūl (twin thread) tied to the iraṇṭu nīrkuṭaṅkaḷ (two new earthen water pots) and the kalacam.45

**The role of the maternal uncle**

The pregnant woman sits in the centre of the pantal. She is dressed in her bridal dress and her hair is adorned with flowers. The tāymāman or māman46 (maternal uncle) of the pregnant woman applies cantaṇam and tumeric powder (mañcal) to her cheeks. Then, taking some akshatai in both hands, he sprinkles it on the pregnant woman's knees and shoulders and the rest on her head. He then puts vermillion (kuṅkumam) on her forehead and the parting of her hair. The ālam is waved

in front of her and then the vēppilai kāppu (nīm/margosa twig amulet) is put on her by the tāymāman or māman. For this reason, it is known as māman kāppu. Since it is her affiances – primarily the matrilineal kin who protect and "engender" the new mother, the mother's brother is also a symbolic parturient "mother" who protects, enwombs and creates the pregnant woman as mother. Māman kāppu, is also believed to protect the foetus and help guarantee a safe childbirth. Thus, the māman has a crucial role to play is this setting. As a cross-relative, and as the classificatory father-in-law of the pregnant woman, he initiates and assists in the process of transferring her social identity from her womanhood to that of her motherhood.

The vēppilai kāppu is made with margosa twigs and is threaded with white thread. margosa is associated with the virgin goddess Māriyamman and is believed to ward off evil effects and purify the atmosphere (Nishimura 1987: 220). The popular belief is that the māman kāppu with its protective power is very effective against malevolent or negative beings and impure substances. It is powerful enough to ward off evil influences and protect a pregnant woman from them. As the pregnant woman is in a liminal period, she is more susceptible to the peril of malignant and evil forces. The amulet is tied around a pregnant woman's wrist at the commencement of the ceremony by the uncle in order to place her in the protective zone of sacred power. It will be removed on the third day after the ceremony.

**The protection of the bracelets**

This is the most important part of the ceremony. Indeed, vaḷaikāppu means protecting the wrist of the pregnant woman with a talismanic wrist ornament. About nine kaṭṭukkaluttikkaḷ apply cantaṇam to the pregnant woman's cheeks and hands. They then wave the ālam and put akṭatai47 on her head. They put bangles on her arm and in return receive bangles from her. It is commonly said that pregnant women are more susceptible to the influence of evil spirits than others, thus the wearing of the wrist ornaments during the seventh or ninth month after conception is believed by Hindus to ward off the effects of evil spirits.

In return for the gift of valayal (bangles), the pregnant woman honours the kaṭṭukkalutti by giving them bangles, a small comb, a small mirror, tumeric powder, vermillion, betel leaves and flowers. The intention of the custom of putting bangles on the pregnant woman is to bless her so that she may bring forth many children. Each bangle symbolizes a soul born as a human child and bound to the circular and even revolving wheel of birth and death. The bangles are mostly in colours that echo the theme inherent in the ritual use of the germination of grains. It signifies a beginning. The metaphor is established between new vegetal growth and human beings. Beck (1969) also refers to green as a colour of "vegetal abundance" in Tamil Nadu. Later, gifts are presented to the pregnant woman by her relatives and friends.

Two kaṭṭukkaluttikkaḷ circle the ālam tray three times in front of the pregnant woman.48 Then one of the kaṭṭukkaluttikkaḷ carefully carries the ālam tray through the pantal to the area of the vācal (the street in front of the doorstep) or muccanti49 (the place where three roads meet) and pours it out. It is believed to destroy tirusṭi (evil eye), which would otherwise have been cast on the pregnant woman. Last, the laṭcumi viḷakku or kāmāṭci viḷakku (ceremonial lamp) is handed to the pregnant woman. She enters the house and puts the lamp near photos of the household deities, ancestors and gods and offers prayer.

Finally, the two earthen pots containing water that were kept in front of the pregnant woman are carried by kaṭṭukkalutti and poured out at the aracamaram (pipal tree) or vēppamaram (margosa tree) or into a well. Either the aiyar (priest) or the maruttuvacci who performed the ritual is given fifty or one hundred rupees as well as fruits, rice and other items used in the rite. The same day or the day after the ceremony, the pregnant woman goes to her natal house with her husband. During the woman's first pregnancy he is supposed to stay with his wife's natal family. Should he leave immediately after having taken his wife to her natal home, it may be because he was not received with great esteem.

The vaḷaikāppu marking the end of the first pregnancy such as is celebrated in this community of untouchables in Tamil Nadu is very elaborate. Among all the ritual practices of this rite, two will retain our attention. It is a question of two divination practices, one concerning the normal or complicated nature of the coming delivery, the other regarding the sex of the unborn child.

### The issues of two divination practices

As described earlier in the section entitled "Prognosis of the delivery", the purpose of the opening of the eyes of a tender coconut (iḷanīr kaṇṭirakkiratu) rite is to predict the favourable or complicated outcome of the future childbirth. This prediction does not lead to an explanation of the causality of this event, nor is it followed by any therapeutic action. This possibility also does not orient the decision of the families as regards the manner of attending to the childbirth. It does not necessarily imply a decision to resort to medical intervention at the level of a primary health centre or maternity hospital.

This absence of decision results mainly of two reasons. When obstetric services are available and accessible, people prefer to have recourse to a hospital or health centre. In villages more distant from roads suitable for motor vehicles, traditional birth attendants are most often involved in the care of the childbirths because of their proximity and the lower costs of their services. According to Saha and Ravindran (2002), the reluctance to invest more money in the childbirth would indicate the low value given to the life or death of a woman by her family circle and by society. According to our observations, this choice does not seem to be correlated with the question of the status of the pregnant woman in her community. In Tamil Nadu, the puberty rite, the mañcanīr, which is determinant for the future fecundity of young girls, and the vaḷaikāppu ceremony are occasions involving numerous costs for the families. The decision to avoid delivery at a hospital certainly makes it possible to limit the expenditures connected with this way of attending to the birth (transport, food, medicine, etc.). Delivery at home with a traditional birth attendant is a simple solution that requires neither the organization of a transport system nor the movement of several persons. Nevertheless, this "choice" appears also to be a consequence of an evaluation of the obstetric risk by the families that differs from that provided by biomedical reasoning. The recommendations of the World Health Organization as regards the reduction of maternal mortality are based on several postulates, one of which is the unpredictability of obstetric complications. No correlation was shown between the presence of obstetric risks, the identification of which is one of the main objectives of prenatal consultation, and the appearance of a complication during childbirth. Thus a woman identified as being without risk can have a post-partum haemorrhage, while a woman identified as being at risk can give birth normally.50 According to recommendations of international public health institutions, only a generalized

attendance of childbirths in a medical structure enables of a significant reduction of infant and maternal mortality. Contrary to childbirth at home, this way of delivery is the only one that is able to take charge of obstetric complications.

However, according to popular representations, risk at childbirth is foreseeable. The purpose of the iḷanīr kaṇtirakkiratu ritual is to make a prediction. According to the statements of our interlocutors, the lack of correlation between the revelation of a complicated childbirth during this rite and the decision to resort to medical attendance are based on three explanations. First, for reasons we have described, the absence of an alternative concerning the place of childbirth is one of the reasons mentioned by some women. The manner of attendance at childbirth is generally decided before the celebration of the vaḷaikāppu. Second, the normal or complicated nature of the delivery depends on whether the rules and prescriptions are respected by the woman during the period of gestation. The appearance of a complication would thus be a sign that a rule had not been followed, for which alone the woman who gives birth is held responsible and must assume the consequences. Third, the iḷanīr kaṇtirakkiratu ritual appears to essentially represent a social formality. Little credit is given to the revelation of a prospective complicated childbirth during this celebration.

Before examining this hypothesis, let us see what another divinatory practice carried out during the vaḷaikāppu tells us regarding this point. As already described in the section entitled "A "traditional scanning method" for foetal sex determination", the corresponding practice consists in the divination of the sex of the unborn child. The preference given to the male child in India has been amply documented and it is not necessary to consider this question. In Karik, the prediction of the sex of the unborn child is a subject that the women recurrently evoke. There are numerous popular means of prediction. The appearance of an illness in the pregnant woman's oldest child would signify the birth of a child of the same sex as the latter. Conversely, the continued good health of the oldest child would indicate the birth of a child of the opposite sex. The appearance of specific marks on the face of the mother during labour pains would also be an indication of the sex of the unborn child. Finally, the colour of the vaginal discharge of the woman in labour prior to the expulsion of the child is seen as a more or less reliable sign in the determination of the sex of the unborn child.51

During, the practice of sex divination it is said that if the coconut milk flows in "a zigzag", the expected child is a girl, and if it flows vertical and straight, a boy will be born. We have observed that the person responsible for this task accomplishes it with care. Thus, the coconut milk spreads according to the desired path, that is, that which signifies the birth of a boy. The a priori "planned" nature of the outcome of this performance seems to be commonly accepted and does not give rise to comment from those attending the ceremony. The announcement of a boy causes enthusiastic and restrained approbation from the public. When we discussed with the maruttuvacci in Karik the subject of a girl born a few days earlier whom she had announced to be a boy, she replied:

> "In front of everyone, I always say that it will be a boy, otherwise the family will be too sad."

No one in Karik appears to be fooled by this method. The young mother questioned in this regard acknowledged that the objectives of the maruttuvacci were mainly to satisfy the whole family by announcing a boy. Thus the divination rites with favourable or unfavourable outcome of the childbirth and of the sex of the unborn child are examples of divination practices as a "purely interpretative institution" (Sindzingre 1994: 119). The predictions made provide no therapeutic instructions. No preventive measure follows the announcement of a complicated childbirth. In the case of the divination of the sex of the child, the systematic announcement of a boy is to be considered from several points of view. First, this observation is to be situated in the context of practices of female infanticide existing in some communities in Tamil Nadu.52 It appears however quite improbable that the announcement of a child of female sex during the vaḷaikāppu ceremony would possibly influence an infanticide. On the one hand, the villagers know the most reliable means of sex determination of the unborn child is the ultrasound scan.53 The practice of foeticide is widely developed in the urban zone subsequent to the prenatal diagnostic of the sex of the foetus following an amniocentesis (Lingam 1998). In rural areas, because of the lack of access to prenatal biomedical diagnostic practices, the elimination of female children takes place mainly in the hours following birth. Second, the interpretation of the divination rites performed during the vaḷaikāppu ceremony refers to a plane distinct from a "rational" logic. In that eventuality, for example, the announcement of a complicated delivery could be followed by a decision to bring the pregnant women to the hospital at the time of delivery. The performance of these two rites has an internal coherence that must be sought in the context in which they take place. The satisfaction of the mother-to-be is the major intention of this rite. In the eventuality of her death in childbirth, it is indispensable that her desires would be satisfied so that her spirit rests in peace and does not come to trouble the tranquillity of the living. Moreover, appeasement of possible conflicts between the natal and conjugal families is described by the pregnant women as the major concern of this celebration. While no woman mentions being apprehensive regarding the information revealed by the two divination rites, all state their concerns regarding the performance of the rite according to prescriptions.

The final section of this article will allow us to consider the question of the context in which rationality is at work (Benoist 1993). This concept is relevant to understand the coherence of the performance of divination rites in the vaḷaikāppu. We will thus consider the manner in which "this context provides beliefs and decisions with criteria of rationality specific to situations in which they function" (ibid.: 498).

### "Contextual" events of the rite

The main part of this text dealt with the description of the ritual aspect of the vaḷaikāppu. The anthropological method invites us to turn to a "floating observation"54 that makes it possible to observe "(…) beyond the laws and organizational norms of social life (…) the manner in which action is really carried out" (Piette 1996: 47). We will give two illustrations of this on the basis of the description of "contextual"55 events of the vaḷaikāppu rite observed in Karik. The vaḷaikāppu rite generally consists of two distinct phases. The first is devoted to the rites connected with the future of the pregnancy and takes place in the absence of the husband of the pregnant woman. The second is principally intended for acts of benediction, offerings and the giving of gifts. The period of transition between these two phases is easily identifiable. The pregnant woman

withdraws from the assembly and re-appears a few minutes later accompanied by her husband. During the celebration of the vaḷaikāppu of Venilla, a young woman from Karik, the reaction of some of those in attendance enabled us to perceive an unexpected development at this moment. Here is a summary of the account:

> The young wife appeared dressed in the new sari brought by her conjugal family. But contrary to custom, the sari had not been washed. This task normally falls to the mother of the young woman; she however did not appear on the day of the ceremony. The conjugal family had also not brought the two garlands that should adorn husband and wife, but only one intended for their daughter. Voices were raised, two women squabbled. The husband withdrew for a moment and then re-appeared with a worried look; his young wife was sad. He sat down next to her. A woman handed him a garland that she had just made to take the place of that which his wife's family should have brought. The ceremony could continue.

This account shows the various ways in which individuals can express their disagreement or discontent with the situation. The celebration of the vaḷaikāppu rite is in fact apt to rekindle quarrels between the natal and conjugal families. In the case of Venilla, the incident had no consequences for the unfolding of the rite and the ceremony could continue according to the foreseen linearity. In some situations, disputes and lack of understanding can result in a spoilt ritual.

We now describe the case of the vaḷaikāppu of Tamarine. She is a young woman raised by her mother's sister, and we are acquainted with the family setbacks prior to her marriage and the succession of quarrels occasioned by the latter. The gist of the situation is as follows.

> When Tamarine's parents arrived in the village of her husband's family, no one was present to welcome them. Someone eventually received them, but immediately remarked that the objects required for the ceremony had not been correctly prepared. When the time came to celebrate the rite, no one knew what should be done. Tamarine's parents thought that this role fell to Tamarine's adoptive aunt, who generally assumed responsibility for all the decisions concerning her. The aunt expected that the parents of the young woman see to matters. Two hours later, the elders of Tamarine's in-laws began the preparations. They however felt that it was too late to perform the entire rite. Villagers think that after eight o'clock, the time when the foxes begin to howl, protective rites should be avoided. The ceremony was limited to the giving of bracelets and the two divination rites were not performed. What was said a few days after Tamarine's "spoilt" vaḷaikāppu indicated the minor importance given to the absence of the revelations normally made during the divination rites (which were not carried out on this occasion). Everyone spoke of the incompleteness of the celebration and the fact that the pleasure of rejoicing had been vitiated by unresolved conflicts.

These conclusions shed light on the apparent irrationality of the divination rites that we have mentioned above. In the eventuality of a "normal" development of the ceremony, the revelations of these rites certainly do not entail any decision concerning the coming childbirth, even though this could be assumed. The realization of the two divination practices according to foreseen

modalities justifies their raison d'être. In the framework of a "spoilt" ceremony, it is not so much the absence of revelations that is regretted as the failure of the rite to ensure its first purpose of social cohesion. This observation invites us to conclude with Faizang (2001: 13) that " 'the irrationality' of behaviours is here not the consequence of the irrationality of beliefs or that of the contradiction between the actions of the subjects and the effects they produce, but the result of a subjugation of their behaviours to the symbolic logics that prevail over the pursued goals."

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The vaḷaikāppu, originally practised by certain social groups, is today celebrated in numerous families in all classes, castes and geographic areas. The rite that is associated with it is subject to transformations of actions formerly carried out and to the invention of new practices, the modalities of which are determined by the social, cultural and cognitive networks that each group mobilizes. In Karik, the old women observe that at present no one in the village any longer knows the songs of the vaḷaikāppu, of which only the vaḷḷuvar, now deceased, had the secret. They are unaware of what some of their children or grandchildren are in a position to teach them; in record shops in town and on the Internet, recordings of the songs specific to the celebration of the vaḷaikāppu are available. Be that as it may, the vaḷaikāppu such as it is celebrated is meticulously prepared. It is the subject of an elaboration of varied practices, each of which constitutes the symbolic meaning given to the event. The vaḷaikāppu appears as a prediction rite. It corresponds to a passive reading of destiny. As a preventive rite, it has the objective of satisfying the disposition of the young mother so as to influence the course of dramatic events expected in the case of her death. The vaḷaikāppu is a periodic rite celebrating a cycle of life. Validating the fundamental principle of the rite, the occurrence of the vaḷaikāppu is repeated each time the circumstances demanding it (the seventh month of pregnancy) are reproduced. This rite has an individual character and signifies the passage of the pregnant woman to the state of motherhood. The vaḷaikāppu also has a collective purpose as it aims at protecting the community. However, in a situation in which the young pregnant woman represents both a burden (for the natal family) and a gain (for the conjugal family), the vaḷaikāppu has mainly a value as social obligation. Its purpose is to maintain order and appearances, even if anxieties, doubts and the hopes of everyone are obvious and remain generally concealed or are insidiously expressed.

## Notes

1 The information resulted of research in the field conducted from August 2003 to May 2005 in the framework of the project "Transmission of HIV and Childbirth Practices in South India, an Anthropological Approach", initiated by the Centre de Recherche Cultures, Santé, Sociétés, of the Paul Cézanne University at Aix-Marseille, France. Our thanks to the partner institutions in the project, the French Institute of Pondicherry, the Pondicherry Institute of Linguistics and Culture, as well as to the sponsors the Agence National de Recherches sur le Sida and Ensemble Contre le Sida.

2 The people belong for the most part to the untouchable castes of the Paraiyars (paraiyar) or pariahs (agricultural labourers) and of the aruntatiyar (a contemporary name for the untouchable caste of leather workers in the Telugu language, also named cakkiliyar). Today, because of the inadequacy between caste and trade and the growing heterogeneity of caste, numerous aruntatiyar do not carry out this job. See Deliège (2004b).

3 "Marriage is an institution, whereas family is an association which embodies the institution of marriage" (Lowie 1961: 87).

4 A fictitious name.

5 Practices of changing partners or of intra-familial adoption were also reported to us.

6 Karma is what condemns one to be reborn so as to harvest the fruits that have not become "ripe" in the present life (Biardeau 1995).

7 That is, that described in the fundamental sacred texts of Hinduism, including the four Vedas and the Upanishads. As regards the distance separating these texts and the religious representations and practices of the untouchables in South India, see Deliège (2004a).

8 See the English translation provided by Warrier (1977).

9 See the report by Saravan (2000) on the subject of the multiplication of "dowry deaths".

10 The works of Peedicayila et al. (2004) and Mago and Ahmad (2005) also refer to the increase in acts of physical violence against pregnant women. The circumstances of the occurrence of blows, injuries and burns inflicted by their husbands or their in-laws are often connected with recurrent complaints about an insufficient dowry.

11 The second phenomenon is the substantialization of caste and brings about a shift from the interdependence of castes to their competition (Deliège 1993).

12 The other historical process at the origin of dowry demand generalization is colonialism (van Hollen 2003: 99).

13 We shall see later that the course of the rite can vary according to caste.

14 This term literally means morning sickness. It is a matter of bouts of sickness during pregnancy, which are most frequent in the morning.

15 The Tamil term designating the hamlet reserved for untouchables.

16 The word valayal is a noun from the verb valai, which means to surround; hence, valayal may be taken to mean an ornament to surround the wrist. Thus, vaḷaikāppu and valayaṇivilā have one and the same meaning.

17 Cūl means pregnancy and kāppu means amulet, so this ceremony is known as cūl kāppu because the auspicious sacred amulet is put on the pregnant woman during its performance.

18 Nīr in nīrmutuvu means water, mutuvu means the back part of the body. This ceremony got the name nīrmutuvu because tender coconut milk is poured over the back of the pregnant woman.

The term nīrmutuvu is used in certain areas of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry. This rite is more prevalent among lower castes than higher castes.

19 Similarly, in mutukupāl, mutuku means back part of the body and pāl means milk and this ceremony is also known as mutukupāl because milk is poured on the back of the pregnant woman. The ceremony is performed in areas where the nīrmutuvu rite is performed.

20 Cīmantam derives its name from the fact that the hair of the pregnant woman is parted at the centre of the head, which is also the etymological meaning of the term.

21 This aspect will be considered in detail later.

22 According to estimates in 2000, 540 women in India – for 100,000 living births - continued to die during the period of pregnancy or within 42 days following childbirth (WHO 2004).

23 Maternal mortality rate estimate in Tamil Nadu is 150-200 (Government of India 2005).

24 The woman who dies during pregnancy or delivery. She is viewed as being potentially evil.

25 According to Tambiah, female property is largely confined to moveable goods in classic Hindu law and also in most parts of India today women are given cash, jewellery and household goods, which constitute stridhana (i.e., female property) in Sanskrit (1973: 68). Kapadia (1995) notes that an important aspect of natal gifts is the fact that they are widely seen as constituting their daughter's share of parental property.

26 Pūcaipoṭṭa kuṭam and kuṭam are the same. Tanaka says that kuṭam (pot) has various symbolic meanings; the most essential being holy pot, a womb or a female body. The pot full of water suggests the idea of a fertile womb. Extending interpretations, the water can be viewed as amniotic fluid, while the margosa leaves in it symbolize the vital power arising from it. The pot is thus a more suitable symbol for a goddess, or a god (1997: 170).

27 Dumont reported that the child in Tamil kinship calls its maternal uncle tāymāman or māman (mother's brother) (1983: 86-87). As among the Piramalai kaḷḷar, the maternal uncle plays an important role in all life-cycle ceremonies in Tamil culture. He is the first in the series of relatives giving gifts (ibid.).

28 Dubois says that tōraṇam (sanskrit term) should always be used at times of rejoicing. It is an outward sign of rejoicing and announces that a feast is taking place, inviting people to attend (1999: 182).

29 The maṇavarai serves as a seat for all humans, e.g., for persons going through auspicious rites of passage, as well as for ritual objects.

30 Pullari or Pillari is the colloquial name for Lord Vighnesvara, also called Piḷḷaiyār, Ganesha and Vināyakar. Widespread throughout India, he is one of the most universally adored deities (Brown 1992). In Tamil country, piḷḷai means "child" and piḷḷaiyār "noble child"; it probably originally meant "the young one of an elephant" (Bagchi 1983: 259). We encountered the term Pullari rather than Pillari in our fieldwork.

31 Pullari is made with fresh cāṇam (cow dung) in the form of a cone, and prayers are offered to Ganesha so as to remove obstacles to the performance of the ritual.

32 Arukampul is the holiest of all grasses and is associated with the fertility rituals (Maity 1989: 190). In Sanskrit, it is known as darbha (Bhattacharyya 1996: 240).

33 In Sanskrit, kalasa, and in Tamil, kalacam, mean auspicious brass vessel. Hanchett reports that the kalacam is a small brass pot full of water, often found at the centre of a pūcai (1988: 57). It is used to represent a temporary embodiment of a deity, ancestor or other spirit receiving offerings. While discussing the significance of this type of vessel, Babb (1975: 42-44) quotes a Chattisgarhi priest as saying that it represents "the infinite in the finite".

34 The raw rice coloured with tumeric is called aricata arici. It is generally used during life-cycle ceremonies in Tamil Nadu. This is a gesture of welcome and blessing, given at the vaḷaikāppu ceremony and other joyful occasions.
35 This tree, Musa sapientum, is considered to be sacred not only in Tamil Nadu but also in other parts of the world. The leaves and fruits of the plantain plant are considered to be important in religious rites and rituals, especially on the occasion of a marriage (Maity 1989).
36 The grinding stone for spices is called ammi, comparable to ammā, "mother". The cylinder is ammi-kulavi, the "baby" (Dumont 1986: 88).
37 An arivāl is sickle made of iron, a metal that has the power of frightening spirits and counteracting demonical influences of various kinds. Hence, the arivāl is used in all life-cycle rituals (Crooke 1978: 29).
38 Ālam is the Tamil colloquial form of the Sansrkit word āratti.
39 Karittuṇṭu is a piece of charcoal. Hanchett notes that the black colour has the power to repel the evil eye. Abbott has observed that white threads are used to invoke the power of beneficent spirits while black ones are used to invoke the power of malevolent spirits (1974: 279).
40 The mukūrttam (auspicious part of the day) is a period of roughly one hour that is suitable for auspicious ceremonies such as betrothals, marriages and pregnancies.
41 navatāṇiyam (nine varieties of grains) usually consists of kaṭuku (mustard), nēl (husked rice), tuvarai (red gram), payaru (Bengal gram), eḷ (sesame seeds), karuñcīrakam (cumin seeds), uḷuntu (black gram), koḷḷu (horse gram) and another kind of grain called kaupi.
42 Knipe says that the priest invokes Agni the god of fire to come to the pit, and Agni consumes the offering and transfers it to the deities. Agni has been described as a messenger god (1975: 124-130). Supporting Knipe's description, Tanaka views two kinds of symbolism in the hōmam (fire sacrifice). One is the symbolism of digestion, as Agni consumes the offerings, and the other is the symbolism of procreation. Fire is the god's mouth in the former, while it is a vagina (Tamil kūti) and offerings are seeds (vindu, Tamil vintu) in the latter (1977: 141).
43 Iḷanīr is the tender coconut. According to Crooke, the coconut tree (Cocos nucifera) provides an important fruit in social and religious ceremonies. The coconut is considered to be sacred and is called in sanskrit śriphala, or the fruit or Śri (Lakshmi), the goddess of prosperity. It is a symbol of fertility and throughout northern India is kept in shrines and presented by priests to women who desire offspring, especially male children (1968: 106).
44 The Sanskrit sumangali takes in Tamil the form kaṭṭukkalutti, meaning "auspicious married woman". Kapadia notes that Brahmins use the Sanskrit term sumangali, while non-Brahmin castes use the Tamil term kaṭṭukkalutti (1995: 115). Nishimura (1987) observes that sumangali is the highest and most desirable status for a woman in Hindu society. In Sanskrit, su means subha (auspiciousness), as does mangala. In India, married women whose husbands are alive are auspicious and good, as this implies the well-being of the family (ibid.: 258). Reynolds claims that sumangali means a married woman and mother (1980: 38). Therefore, the kaṭṭukkalutti enjoys a most fortunate auspicious status in the ranks of village life.
45 The practices of opening the eyes of a coconut and of pouring the coconut milk on the banana leaf that we observed in Karik do not appear to be carried out in town. The chapter by van Hollen concerned with this rite in Tamil Nadu also does not make mention of it (van Hollen 2003).
46 The maternal uncle plays a major role in the Dravidian kinship system. For Tamils, the term tāymāman designates the mother's brother more precisely than the term māman, which also signifies maternal uncle, but designates mother's brother as well as husband of the father's sister and the father of the spouse and other individuals (Deliège 1996: 27). This term also denotes the

father-in-law, since a man is expected to marry the daughter of the maternal uncle or of the maternal aunt. For a girl, it can designate her future husband, since he is the preferred husband.
47 Akṭatai is the name given to coloured husked rice with a mixture of saffron and vermilion. It is used when performing auspicious ceremonies (Dubois 1978: 150).
48 Stork also mentioned the ālam. She said that the ālam includes such items as grains of cooked rice, a small branch from a margosa tree, a piece of charcoal, some lime and a small quantity of turmeric powder and water. The turmeric powder or vermilion gives the mixture a red colour (1982).
49 Muccanti is considered to have great supernatural power. It is important in causing and removing bewitchment and tirusṭi.
50 For information on obstetric risks refer to the chapter "Antenatal Care" in the guide developed by the WHO (2003).
51 Red discharge would be the sign of the birth of a girl, while white vaginal discharge would indicate the birth of a boy. According to the old women in Karik, the reliability of this sign would not be the same today because of changes in the dietary practices of women.
52 See the works of Aswini and Véron (2004), Bandyopadhyay (2003) Kasturi (1994) and Krishnaswamy (1998) as regards female infanticide.
53 This practice is legally prohibited. In May 2001, the Supreme Court strongly encouraged the central government and local authorities in India to carry out actions in favour of a strict interdiction of sex diagnostic tests (anonymous 2001).
54 An expression borrowed from Affergan and cited in Laburthe-Tolra (1998).
55 We choose this adjective in comparison to the initial perspective in which we have presented this study. Another choice in the way of understanding this question could have led to a consideration of these events as central and the ritual practices as peripheral to the rite.

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